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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [EAID](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA ETHNIC INSURGENCY (C-AL7-01035):
COUNTERINSURGENCY IN OGADEN RAISES HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 1745 (AND PREVIOUS)
[1](#)B. STATE 88346 (NOTAL)

Classified By: ERIC WONG, ACTING POL-ECON COUNSELOR. REASON: 1.4 (D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. In separate briefings to Embassy officers, representatives of Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), as well as USG-funded researchers conducting a regional assessment of Somali issues, have highlighted concerns that the Government of Ethiopia's ongoing counterinsurgency campaign against suspected Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) rebels in Ethiopia's Somali Region may lead to a significant humanitarian crisis. MSF and others report that Ethiopia's federal government has not delivered any food aid to the Somali Region since November 2006, despite having identified at least 500,000 beneficiaries. Current military operations by the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) have resulted in restrictions on vehicular movement into the region by humanitarian and UN agencies, and even commercial food shipments are now effectively blocked. MSF alleges that the ENDF has burnt three villages in areas predominantly held by ethnic Ogadeni; there are also unconfirmed reports that the ENDF may have forcibly displaced pastoralists and relocated them to larger enclosed villages, as part of its counterinsurgency campaign. The ENDF is reportedly using attack helicopters in the ONLF stronghold of Fik; press reports of systemic rape, however, have not been substantiated and appear to be unfounded. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On June 26, poloff, ORA analyst, and REFCOORD met with Medecins Sans Frontieres-Belgium Country Coordinator Francois Calas and Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland representative Will Robertson (STRICTLY PROTECT), each of whom has worked in Ethiopia for approximately 18 months. Both organizations are conducting humanitarian relief work in Ethiopia's Somali Region: MSF-Belgium is operating in Gode city and to the west of Gode, while MSF-Holland has five international staff operating a maternal and children's health clinic in Warder (Somali name: Wardheer), the capital of Warder Zone (the Region's easternmost zone, bordering Galcaio in Somalia). As Warder is "a garrison town" (i.e., local headquarters for the Ethiopian military), no ONLF fighters had sought medical treatment from MSF's facility there, Robertson said. He added that MSF-Holland had established its presence in Warder in early 2007, with the approval of the Somali Regional government as well as the Somali Regional health bureau, but

that it now operated with the authorization of the ENDF, as federal authorities from the GOE have largely supplanted the authority of regional officials.

VILLAGES BURNT; ALLEGED FORCED DISPLACEMENTS

¶13. (C) Calas and Robertson expressed concerns about numerous reports they had received of "coercive displacement" of populations, from areas where the ENDF was conducting active military operations against suspected ONLF rebels. Populations from south and southwest of Warder were allegedly being moved by Ethiopian security forces to Walwal (north of Warder), as well as to the towns of Yucub and Wufdug (southwest of Warder). According to Calas and Robertson, Ethiopian military operations were directed against ethnic Ogadeni, around Warder and Kebridehar. According to Robertson, Ethiopian security forces were arming local militia against rebels, providing weapons to every male employed by the Somali Regional government. Robertson reported large-scale detentions of suspected ONLF rebels, as well as increased "collective action" against entire villages suspected of rebel activity or support. MSF representatives said they had not seen any movement of Somalis from Somalia to the Somali Region, but noted that distinguishing between Somalis and ethnic Somali Ethiopians would be difficult.

¶14. (C) MSF representatives said they had first-hand information that three villages north of Warder (Jinoole, Caado, and Qaraboole) had been "burnt," presumably by Ethiopian security forces; Robertson noted that MSF staff had traveled through Jinoole en route from Warder. Additionally,

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Robertson said MSF had received second-hand but unconfirmed reports that more than 15 villages south of Warder (between Warder and Shilaabo) had also been burnt. The MSF representatives underscored that as they had not been allowed direct access to this southern area, they were recommending to donor embassies and to UNHQ in New York that the UN dispatch a humanitarian team to these towns in the Ogaden to conduct a first-hand assessment of the situation. (NOTE. Separately, USAID-funded researchers reported that an UNOCHA team would seek to travel from Jijiga. END NOTE.)

¶15. (C) Calas noted that the GOE had blocked all vehicles, including those being operated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), from leaving Gode and proceeding south to the Ogaden. Robertson said that only Ethiopian military vehicles were traveling along the road south from Jijiga; the ENDF wanted all NGO vehicles to travel behind the ENDF, fearing that NGO vehicles traveling in front of military vehicles would only serve to warn the ONLF of the ENDF's approach. As an independent humanitarian organization, MSF rejected the requirement to travel only with armed escorts from the Ethiopian military. Other international NGOs operating in the Ogaden included ICRC (in Gode and Jijiga), Save the Children, and Oxfam, but only MSF was present in Warder.

FOOD AID AND COMMERCIAL FOOD SHIPMENTS HALTED TO REGION

¶16. (C) Both government shipments of food aid, as well as commercial deliveries of food, had been halted by the GOE, according to the MSF representatives. Calas said all commercial trucking from Gode had been halted for several weeks, that no commercial food shipments were being made; furthermore, no food aid from the federal government's Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency (DPPA) had been delivered to the Somali Region since November 2006. He noted that DPPA had allocated food for 500,000 beneficiaries in the Somali Region, but that the GOE had not authorized the World Food Programme (WFP) to distribute it. Robertson added that

the Somali Region's border with Somalia was closed; prices of common consumer goods had risen dramatically, increasing the economic vulnerability of pastoralists were unable to sell their livestock. As a result, the safety net of local communities was being "severely tested."

17. (C) Calas noted that the GOE had conducted earlier military campaigns against the ONLF (e.g., in 2006), but had not previously sought to "blockade trade;" the current restrictions (whether de facto or de jure) on food deliveries represented "a new control mechanism."

18. (C) Calas concluded that, in MSF's view, the GOE (not the ONLF) was the "main element of insecurity" in the Somali Region; the few incidents that MSF had experienced had been caused by the ENDF. UNDP staff had been arrested and beaten in Degehabur (the zone between Jijiga and Warder, and adjacent to Fik). Robertson stated that MSF neither experienced nor anticipated any interference in its operations from the ONLF.

SEPARATE USAID ASSESSMENT ALSO HIGHLIGHTS SUSPENDED FOOD AID

19. (C) Separately, Amciti consultants Ken Menkhaus (an academic researcher of Somali issues, formerly at the National Defense University) and Willet Weeks, highlighted similar concerns about lack of food shipments to the Ogaden, in a June 21 briefing to Ambassador. Menkhaus and Weeks had conducted field research in Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jimma for a USAID-funded regional assessment to be completed in July 2007, and had interviewed travelers to and from the Somali Region. (NOTE. The researchers canceled a trip to Jijiga due to safety concerns; Post issued a travel advisory recommending against travel to the Somali Region following the April 24 attack by the ONLF on a Chinese oil facility in the Ogaden. END NOTE.) The USAID-funded researchers expressed concern that the GOE was either deliberately "using

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food as a weapon," or had implemented several counterinsurgency tactics that were inadvertently exacerbating food insecurity. There was a risk of "accidental but monumental humanitarian crisis."

-- ALL FOOD SHIPMENTS BLOCKED: According to Menkhaus, the humanitarian situation in the Somali Region was growing "worse" and threatened to result in a "sizable humanitarian disaster quickly." Menkhaus expressed concern that DPPA food aid had not been provided by the GOE to the Somali Region since November 2006, despite some 1.1 million individuals who required food assistance; commercial food shipments had also been blocked. At the same time, the ENDF had bought up remaining food stocks itself, he said. Like the MSF representatives, Menkhaus also reported that ethnic Ogadeni administrative zones in the Somali Region were under "lockdown," and that Gode town had been completely shut down to any vehicular traffic as of mid-June; the GOE had also restricted the movement of UN and international aid organizations. Hundreds of individuals had been arrested in the regional capital, Jijiga, prompting a de facto curfew at night.

-- PUBLIC REACTION TO COUNTER-INSURGENCY: Menkhaus observed that as 40-50 percent of the Somali Region's population was not ethnic Ogadeni, views of the ONLF were mixed; however, as a result of feeling the impact of the de facto economic embargo, most were broadly sympathetic to the ONLF. Some believed that the April 24 attack on the Chinese oil facility was a result of inter-clan rivalry, despite the ONLF's public claim of responsibility. There was a popular view that the GOE was indiscriminately engaging in "collective punishment" of the populace, and that the Ethiopian military was targeting its own citizens, not foreigners. Many residents felt that over the last decade, the Somali Region had become

more economically integrated with the highland regions (Amhara and Tigray) than with Somalia, and that the counterinsurgency could adversely impact the development of the Somali Region. Many held the USG "indirectly accountable" for the GOE's actions. Menkhaus said Somali-Ethiopians interviewed had expressed "fear and concern," principally blaming the ENDF for insecurity, but acknowledging that some "security incidents" had been caused by elements who may not be affiliated with the ONLF. Menkhaus assessed that the ONLF likely could not stop "new actors," such as al-Shabaab militia affiliated with Somalia's Council of Islamic Courts (CIC), from crossing the border into the Somali Region. Rebels from the United Western Somali Liberation Front also operated in the Region, but "not enough to be a growing concern," Menkhaus commented. Willet Weeks highlighted that even stable areas within Ethiopia faced pressure as a result of Ethiopian security operations; Jimma's majority Muslim population was quiet "but nervous." Cross-border consequences were also a concern: authorities at Mandera faced pressure from the GOE to keep the Kenya-Ethiopia border sealed.

ALLEGED FORCED VILLAGIZATION AND DISPLACEMENT BY ENDF

¶10. (C) Prof. Menkhaus said he had received unconfirmed reports that the ENDF was "collecting villagers" and removing them to larger towns, forcing pastoralists to live in larger enclosures, as part of the GOE's counterinsurgency campaign against the ONLF in the Somali Region. Menkhaus cautioned that a policy of concentration and establishing protected villages, such as that pursued in northern Uganda, threatened to "decimate herds" of livestock, and would create a large-scale humanitarian disaster.

AERIAL BOMBARDMENT POSSIBLE; BUT SYSTEMIC RAPE UNCONFIRMED

¶11. (C) Menkhaus reported that the ENDF was using attack helicopters in Fik. MSF representatives had no information to corroborate recent press reports of ENDF aerial bombardment in the Ogaden, noting that Gode Zone and Fik (which had a significant ONLF guerrilla presence) were areas

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where MSF did not operate. They confirmed that ENDF helicopters had been used to medevac wounded troops.

¶12. (C) MSF representatives said they had not/not received any reports of systematic rape in the Somali Region (as alleged recently by the New York Times), but added that Muslim women would be unlikely to discuss such incidents openly, in the event they occurred. Menkhaus said he had heard of widespread detentions in Jijiga, but had not/not received reports from any interviewees on the use of systemic rape by GOE or regional security authorities.

¶13. (C) COMMENT. Both USG-funded researchers and international NGOs thus separately assert that desperately needed food, whether in the form of food assistance provided by the central government or commercial food shipments from vendors, has been blocked from delivery to the Somali Region, due to the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign. GOE officials have publicly stated that their campaign against the ONLF will continue for at least three months, thus likely increasing the vulnerability of an already economically underdeveloped pastoralist population. Post will raise concerns with GOE principals and continue to monitor the situation closely. Embassy is convening a meeting early next week with representatives of UNOCHA, other UN agencies, and NGOs operating in the Ogaden. Ambassador raised deep concern about these issues with GOE Minister of Defense Kuma Demeksa on June 27, and will meet with Prime Minister Meles soon on this issue. END COMMENT.

